Where Are We Going?

A Discussion of Mobility History in Latin America

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Since the launch of the T²M Yearbook in 2009, reviewers of Latin American mobility history have exhibited dissatisfaction with the way in which the topic has been addressed as often as they have highlighted the emergence of new (fresh?) and promising perspectives that outline a change in this scholarship.[1] In contrast to the economic and political histories of transport, a certain novelty can be found in critical consideration of technologies, as well as in the recent emphasis given to culture and social practices (a history of mobility from below). But there are still pending issues that we need to tackle.

This article consists of a theoretical discussion of mobility, but does not intend to give the term a final definition. In so doing, it is important to notice that the "mobility turn" implies a holistic approach to the movement of people, ideas, objects, and information. It suggests looking at mobilities as an assemblage of the technologies, practices, meanings, spaces, bodies, and power dynamics that make movement possible or not. A critical mobility framework also implies seeing physical movement as more than going from A to B. It views travel as a meaningful practice rather than as something to be minimized.

One might say that there is a transitional moment in Latin American history fed partly by theories involved in the so-called mobility turn but mostly by creative local research from different subfields of history. A good example of how mobility is taking on more significance was the session "Transport and Mobility History in the Southern Cone" at the Conference of Inter-Schools of History in Mendoza, Argentina, in 2013. Nonetheless, the papers discussed at the conference, focused as they were on urban mobility, railways, tramway electrification, roads, tourism, the environment, and commuting, triggered more questions than answers, since mobility was rarely queried. These began with the title of the

1. See *Mobility in History,* volumes 1 to 5.

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panel, where mobility and transport appear to be competing. As Tim Cresswell points out, "though transport and mobility are very often used in a synonymous manner, they have distinct connotations. Mobility is a contextualised phenomenon whereas transport is just the revealed part of it."[2] In principle, this should not be a significant problem—even T²M joins the two terms along with "traffic"; migration studies still use "spatial or territorial mobility" to emphasize that mobility does not only apply to the idea of social upgrade, as it is commonly understood in social sciences; and so forth.

This is mainly a provocative commentary, of course, aimed at kicking off a deeper discussion about how mobility is being studied by Latin American historians and how the region can provide a reflection of mobility as a global process. The search for a specifically Latin American mobility highlights the importance of studying difference within the region and between regions, but also the need for a more robust conceptualization of mobility that encompasses diversity yet works within a common language.

Mobility: Why turn?

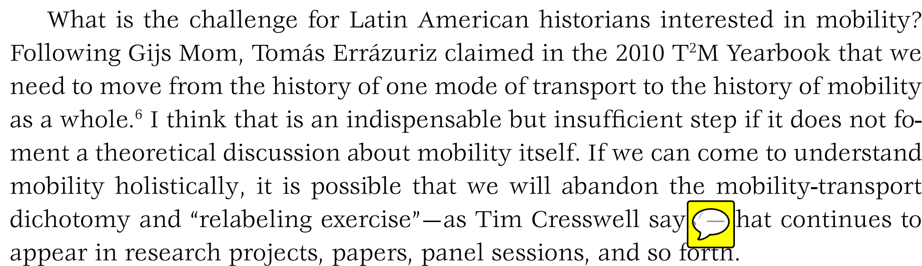
I am aware that calling for an upgrade of transport history could trigger a valid answer: "turn if you want to," as Freeman responded to Divall and Revill's cultural turn in transport history.[3] A recent discussion among Argentinean scholars of the University Transport Network about the name of the group is very illustrative of the resistance to these kinds of changes. Scholars from engineering, logistics, statistics, and planning tended to defend the term "transport" against the more abstract "mobility". Even those who have read new literature about mobility insisted that "transport" was more suitable because everyone can recognize it.

When we talk about the mobility turn we inevitably refer to European and American scholarship that has given rise to a constellation of concepts that are in constant, very often critical, dialogue with each other. Such perspectives frame mobility as a key element of social life: as an assemblage of technologies, practices, representations (Urry); as movement + power + meaning (Creswell); as a mediation between the material and culture (Divall and Revill); and as potential movement (Kaufmann), among other concepts.[4] It is well-known that scholarly

2. Tim Cresswell and Tanu Priya Uteng, *Gendered Mobilities* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2008), 16.
3. Michael Freeman, "'Turn If You Want To': A Comment on the 'Cultural Turn' in Divall and Revill's 'Cultures of Transport,'" *Journal of Transport History* 27, no. 1 (2006): 138–149.
4. John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007); Tim Cresswell, "The Production of Mobilities," in *The Cultural Geography Reader,* ed. Tim Oakes and Patricia Lynn Price (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 325–333; Colin Divall and George Revill, "Cultures of Transport: Representation, Practice and Technology," *Journal of Transport History* 26 (2005): 99–111; Vincent Kaufmann, *Re-Thinking Mobility: Contemporary Sociology* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2002).

acceptance of mobility did not occur in most European and American academic fields without friction, resistance, or outright rejection.[5] Despite the staying power of such critiques, the number of scholars, projects, dissertations, and theses from different countries plus articles, books, and specialized journals dedicated to the new field of mobility studies and that share a common theoretical language continues to grow.

What is the challenge for Latin American historians interested in mobility? Following Gijs Mom, Tomás Errázuriz claimed in the 2010 T²M Yearbook that we need to move from the history of one mode of transport to the history of mobility as a whole.[6] I think that is an indispensable but insufficient step if it does not foment a theoretical discussion about mobility itself. If we can come to understand mobility holistically, it is possible that we will abandon the mobility-transport dichotomy and "relabeling exercise"—as Tim Cresswell says[7]—that continues to appear in research projects, papers, panel sessions, and so forth.



In the field of Latin American history, as T²M reviews show, local and foreign scholars have largely studied transport and mobility through economic, political, urban, tourism, technology, and migration frames. Transport mostly appears as a subfield of economic and political history. Scholars from geography, literature, and history have used traveler stories, tourism, and migration to deal with mobility. These works constitute a well-documented corpus that informs us about movement, displacement, flows, and transportation of people, goods, information, and technology, and about the interests and conflicts involved in the production of mobility. But to what extent do they constitute a reflection about what movement implies, how the social and technologies interact, about the "fixed" and the mobile? How much has the idea of "transport innovation" been deconstructed or brushed against this grain?[8] In urban history, for example, how many times is transport a variable to explain urban sprawl or a subject to explore daily experiences of time, space, or sociability?

Such reflection among historians needs ontological and epistemological questions, a series of concepts that shape a new language. I do not claim that a unified, monolithic language is a precondition for a mobility turn in Latin American history, but a theoretical discussion that allows building bridges among scholars from a variety of academic backgrounds would be beneficial. At the very least, we need to feel that we are moving beyond transport without abandoning the term but rethinking it. We must tackle movement from another perspective. We

5. Recently, Tim Creswell described a migration conference in which scholars still doubted the pertinence of the mobility paradigm: Tim Cresswell, "Mobility: Geographies, Histories, Sociologies," *Transfers* 3, no. 1 (2013): 150–151.
6. Tomás Errázuriz, "Looking for Latin American Urban Mobility History," in *Mobility in History: Themes in Transport (T²M Yearbook 2011),* ed. Gijs Mom (Neuchâtel: Alphil, 2010), 196.
7. Cresswell, "Mobility," 151.
8. Rodrigo Booth's critical history of environment (pollution) and motorization in Chile (horse-drawn and electric tramways and cars) is auspicious.

should expand and cross disciplinary boundaries. We need to be creative and provocative in our research. That is the nature of the turn.

Mobility from below

The works reviewed in previous T²M yearbooks give the impression that what has prevailed in Latin American transport history is a "view from above," while, in reality, new studies highlight mobility from below. A "view from above" tends to discuss mobility in connection to the economy, politics, and technologies. Moreover, the market and the state appear as the main actors. In urban history, for example, transport has appeared as an external factor to broader public affairs. Although James Scobie's history of Buenos Aires gives a glimpse of everyday experience of tram traveling, his interest in this public transport is to explain how, along with property speculation, it led to urban expansion.[9]

An example of mobility from below can be found in Melina Piglia's history of motorist associations in Argentina, since she explains how automobility, national road policies, tourism, and motor racing have been strongly influenced by these associations. She shows the sociability and culture around the automobile and documents how the associations became political actors.[10] New approaches to the city and mobility can be found in the history of Santiago de Chile's motorization and Buenos Aires's underground railways.[11] Errázuriz and Zunino Singh, respectively, give an account of the way in which transport modernization implied technological, practical, and cultural transformations for urban dwellers as modern passengers. Errázuriz, particularly, has also focused on an unexplored subject, pedestrianism.[12]

It is worth mentioning that these histories, which focus on how mobility was produced and consumed, have largely benefited from the inclusion of cultural analysis. The cultural responses to technological transformations in literature have been historicized by Guillermo Giucci, in the case of the car, and by Martin Cooper, in the case of railways in Brazil, and inform us about the cultural meanings of modernity and mobility. These historians counter the "serious" sources of

9. James Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870–1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974).
10. Melina Piglia, *Autos, Rutas y Turismo: El Automóvil Club Argentino y el Estado* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2014).
11. See Tomas Errázuriz, "La Experiencia del Tránsito: Motorización y Vida Cotidiana en el Santiago Metropolitano, 1900–1931" (Ph.D. diss., Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2010); Dhan Zunino Singh, "El Subte como Artefacto Cultural (Buenos Aires, 1886–1944): La Historia Cultural como Aporte a los Estudios de las Movilidades Urbanas," *Revista Transporte y Territorio* 9 (2013): 173–200.
12. Tomás Errázuriz, "When Walking Became Serious: Reshaping the Role of Pedestrians in Santiago, 1900–1931," *Journal of Transport History* 32, no. 1 (2011): 39–65.

economic, political, and urban transport history with the use of cartoons, advertisements, pictures, and other sources. Experiences, representations, discourses, perceptions, and feelings emerge from these sources as elements of mobility that traditional approaches have ignored or dismissed. For their part, cultural historians have not ignored the "material" forces that shape and are shaped by mobility. There remains room to discuss how to deal with the intricate relation or assemblage of technologies, power, meanings, space, and practices, the human-nonhuman relationship, how materials shape culture and viceversa, and to consider what theories underpin the discussion of passengers, drivers, and pedestrians. But there is no doubt that cultural historians have more seriously considered subjectivity without neglecting structures and processes.

In Latin American history it is easy to find international capital shaping transport technologies and networks and, therefore, to conceive it as an imposition—either as a form of external domination or a consequence of local elites' aspirations to both modernize and Europeanize. The view from above has elucidated these processes. A view from below might clarify if that imposition signified a homogenization or if mobility was a "field" of contestation, subversion, or resistance, or, on the contrary, if the consumption of modern transport technologies was something expected, demanded, or supported by popular sectors.

Although the view from below is a way (not the only one) to turn toward a more holistic comprehension of mobilities, there is still a question that lies beneath Latin American histories of mobility, namely, are these particularities different from those experienced in other latitudes? In other words, what is the specificity of Latin American mobility, if it exists?

The answer inevitably involves a well-known debate about the modernization of Latin America: the matter of periphery. Although this question has been largely discussed among Latin American history scholars—with important contributions from urban, cultural, and intellectual history—I think it is relevant to bring the issue to T²M readers and to see how mobility history can contribute to the discussion.

Periphery

The discussion of peripheries raises a question about what we might call a dialectic of the universal and the particular. As Arnaud Passalacqua mentions, "we all know that cultural uses of mobility systems differ from a city to another. But, we must not forget the powerful ability of transport systems to feed homogenization forces."[13] If we agree that mobility is uneven around the world but that transport and communication technologies, as elements of the process of capital expan-

13. Arnaud Passalacqua, "The French Tramway-City," T²M website, http://t2m.org/france-2013/ (accessed 18 July 2014).

sion, have tended to homogenize certain infrastructures, systems, spaces, and even practices, it begs investigation of how Latin American experiences of mobility were and are different from those in the "centers" or differences between Latin American countries themselves.

Cultural historians have largely used the theory of reception to problematize the center-periphery discussion in Latin America.[14] The continent's modernity and all the cultural, social, and spatial processes that it involved has largely been understood as a copy of Europe, an emulation, a degraded version of the original, a "mask," and so on. This view reduces a network of influences, the complex circulation of ideas, goods, capital, workers, and experts, and the way they are consumed to a mere imitation. In the 1980s, "periphery" became a stand-in for the notion of dependency that prevailed in Latin American scholarship over the previous decade. At times, "periphery" was also defined as a process of borrowing that allowed mixture.

More optimistic historians have pointed out that the peripheral position of Latin America, its very distance from the center, was an opportunity to construct an alternative modernity.[15] But the theories of reception are less worried about distances, dependency, or inferiority. According to Roberto Schwarz, copying has always been a way to be modern in South America.[16] The copy, though, is not exactly the same as the original; as Adrián Gorelik states, there is always a discrepancy (*desfase*) between the original model and what is finally implemented.[17] Because of this gap, the ways in which countries are networked and how circulation and receptions occur gain more importance and invite scholars to make multiple comparisons.

Since Latin American mobility has been largely, but not exclusively, influenced by foreign technologies, it offers mobility historians an exciting opportunity to discuss networks and the circulation of not only ideas but also capital, work force, experts, and, most importantly, technologies. The latter makes the analysis of materiality an aspect that cannot be overlooked. The following case illustrates how a diversity of external influences is adapted to local cultural and material conditions resulting in something new or singular.

The first underground railway of Latin America, the Buenos Aires Subte, built by the Anglo-Argentine Tramway Company (AATC) in 1913, could be a good ex-

14. This theory, used originally by literature historians and then for the history of ideas and intellectuals, focuses on readers and how the practice of reading is not passive. In this perspective it can be said that consumption is also a way of production.
15. Richard Morse, "Ciudades 'Periféricas' como Arenas Culturales (Rusia, Austria, América Latina)," *Bifurcaciones* 3 (2005), http://www.bifurcaciones.cl/2005/06/ciudades-perifericas-como-arenas-culturales-2/ (accessed 18 July 2014).
16. Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, *Critical Studies in Latin American Culture* (London: Verso, 1992).
17. Adrián Gorelik, *Miradas Sobre Buenos Aires: Historia Cultura y Crítica Urbana* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno, 2004), 80.

ample of the strong influence of British capital in Argentinean transport at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, in the source material there is no direct evidence as to what model inspired the first underground line. The AATC itself was owned by a multinational syndicate, and the Subte project was headed by an Italian engineer and built by a German company, a diversity that complicates the notion of direct British influence. Furthermore, its design (a rectangular tunnel built close to the street) suggests a connection to the subways of New York or Berlin rather than the London Underground. This design proved pragmatic because this type of tunnel allowed for easier, faster, and cheaper construction (cut-and-cover), perfect for the firm and dry subsoil of Buenos Aires. The design of the first line was also influenced by municipal requirements that sought to avoid deep tunnels and follow international trends in transport and civil engineering. While the depth choice in Buenos Aires was partially a matter of hygiene and economy, it was also connected to a four-year jurisdictional fight between the municipality and the national government over control of the city's underground space. The city only controlled the first "layer" of city subsoil and wanted to build shallowly to maintain power over the system.

Looking at photos of passengers commuting in the Buenos Aires Subte or reading stories of their everyday experiences, one can find that in practice they are similar to those of passengers in other cities. Even the mixture of fascination and fear (the sublime), enthusiasm, and skepticism was an experience similar to that of the "center."[18] A view of how mobility from below permits an examination of the ways technologies worked in very different locations and cultures and allows for an investigation into whether or not those technologies created homogeneous practices and perceptions of time, space, travel, or self. This kind of discussion offers scholars a chance to investigate whether the consumption of external ideas (cosmopolitism) has shaped local processes in similar ways to the center and hidden differences along the way. This is a key consideration when historians use cultural sources such as literature to explain how mobility was perceived. It is very common to find national writers who reproduced European discourses, mainly of modernity, when they depicted local experiences of mobility.

Finally, in revisiting the periphery matter we should avoid the "trap" of considering Latin American singularities as radically different from the experiences of the center. The focus on singularities could stem as easily from localism or nationalism as from the temptation to read difference as subversion, contestation, or alternative. In relation to this, we should be wary of continued "peripheralization": the tendency to see peripheries everywhere. One could make a valid argument that Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, and even Austria, Germany, or Finland

18. Dhan Zunino Singh, "Meaningful Mobilities: The Experience of Underground Travel in the Buenos Aires Subte (1913–1944)," *Journal of Transport History* 35, no. 1 (2014): 97–113.

should be considered European peripheries.[19] But seen from the other side of the Atlantic and the Southern Hemisphere, periphery seems to be an immense terrain, and the center tends to be reduced to a small group of countries. Even more, what the center is—if there is indeed only one!—becomes more and more unclear.

Final considerations

Mobility in Latin American history could be a chance to ask ourselves if such a regional approach is possible, necessary, or helpful. But, first and foremost, more space for discussion of mobility is needed in order to collect scholars interested in turning, opening debates, bringing different perspectives and subjects, or sharing new sensibilities.[20] Such an opening might reinvigorate Latin American history, just as the embrace of gender, cultural, intellectual, popular, and social history themes did during the last decades.

Cultural, social, and critical analysis of mobility has signified a refreshing discussion in Latin American history and offers a chance to go beyond a history from above. Nonetheless, embracing a view from below will not be enough to reach a postdisciplinary approach to mobilities—as Urry has sought—that can understand how power, culture, networks, objects and subjects, movement and stagnation, energy, environment, economy, technologies, gender, and sexuality interplay in different locations and situations across time. In order to achieve this, we need to deepen our theoretical discussion about what we mean when we talk about mobility.

This article does not intend to impose a narrow program for mobility in Latin American history. The challenge is instead to incorporate different approaches while maintaining a common language. This could lead us to discover how mobility has been creatively tackled by historians who do not consider themselves mobility scholars. New examples could be Claudia Darrigrandi, who has explored the experience of a female poet in 1920s Buenos Aires as a *flâneuse.* Her view might be a history of mobility because of the relevance given to walking and women's experiences in the city. In her *While the City Sleeps*—a history of crime, order, and media in Buenos Aires—Lila Caimari briefly but wisely deals with the impact motorization (the car) and technological innovations of media and communications (photojournalism, radio, phones) had upon the car chase, as

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19. See, e.g., the conference Peripheral Modernisms at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, University of London, 23–24 March 2012.

20. In this sense, the Pan-American Mobilities Network, although more focused on contemporary mobilities, is auspicious.

well as the experience and representation of traffic (speed, vertigo, noise, and congestion).[21]

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21. Claudia Darrigrandi, "Ciudad, Cuerpo y Traje: La *Flâneuse* en Buenos Aires," *Revista Iberoamericana* 94, no. 222 (January–March 2008): 85–99; Lila Caimari, *Mientras la Ciudad Duerme: Pistoleros, policías y periodistas en Buenos Aires, 1920–1945* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2012).